

Sleep and Sleep Deprivation

Lack of sleep or irregular sleep that disturbs your body's natural 24-hour cycle can substantially increase your risk of accidents-on and off the job. To work safely, you have to be alert and focused. When you're sleepy, that may be impossible. But we've all had times when we just couldn't sleep or couldn't sleep well; some people even consider that normal. Today, you'll find out a little about the importance of sound sleep and get some tips on how to achieve it.

General Hazards

The relationship between sleep and safety is well known. Studies in California found that sleepy drivers were involved in 20 percent of vehicle accidents. A National Transportation Safety Board report said fatigue figured in 69 air accidents between 1983 and 1986.

Sleepiness blurs the edges, and that's a real hazard on the job. Night shifts have been found to be particularly risky because they throw off regular sleep patterns. All four of the major nuclear plant accidents in the past decade occurred between 1 a.m. and 4 a.m. According to studies of night-shift workers, tasks that require close attention or alertness are especially vulnerable to lack of sleep. Some of the typical dangerous results are drivers nodding off behind the wheel or workers missing warning signals on alarms.

Identifying Hazards

While most people sleep seven to eight hours a night, the amount of sleep each individual needs varies. Most of us need more sleep when we're sick and when we're under stress. Everyone's natural biological rhythms are geared to sleeping at night, when it's dark, and being active during daylight hours. When you have to work at night, or if you work rotating shifts, you can fall victim to fatigue and illness. Feeling rested is more than how long you sleep; it's also a matter of how you sleep. Sound sleep is a sign of health, but many people find it hard to come by. They suffer from insomnia. Insomnia may mean it takes you a half hour or more to fall asleep. Other signs are waking frequently during the night, or waking early and being unable to get back to sleep. The result is that you wake up tired and irritable.

Insomnia is usually a symptom of another problem-either physical, mental, or emotional. You may have insomnia for a night or two when you have a cold or backache, or when you're worried about an upcoming event. Long-lasting insomnia usually is caused by stress or worry. Other possible causes include too much noise at the wrong time or a medical condition such as arthritis, ulcers, asthma, or heart disease. Insomnia may also result from abuse of drugs (including sleeping pills), alcohol, or from drinking too much caffeine. It can also be associated with depression or with phobias, where fears or nightmares wake you.

Whatever the cause, and however long it lasts, insomnia can be dangerous to your health and safety. If you're not "working on all cylinders," your work suffers and you become a hazard to yourself and others.

Protection against Hazards

Everyone wants to get enough sleep, but sometimes it seems that you have to cut back on sleep in order to fit everything else into a 24-hour day. This is almost always true for people who work more than one job, work a lot of overtime, or work at times when their families are asleep. We may cut down on sleep in order to fit in work around the house or yard, time with the family, volunteer activities, or even just the enjoyment of fishing or a favorite TV show. I can't tell you what to cut out of your life so that you can get enough sleep. But I can share some tips on what the experts have found you should-or shouldn't-do to help assure that you get the most from the hours you spend with your head on the pillow.

The first technique is an easy one: Go to sleep when you're tired. Don't prop your eyes open for your favorite late night comic or go to bed extra early to make up for lost sleep. Most people get tired at about the same time every night, which brings us to the next point: Go to bed at the same time every night and get up at the same time every morning, including weekends. This helps your body get into a rhythm that tells it when to sleep-and when to be at peak alertness.

Don't try to make up for a bad night's sleep by staying in bed longer in the morning or taking a nap later. It won't help, and it will hurt your attempts to establish a sleep rhythm. If you have to sleep during the day, try to keep your bedroom dark, cool, and quiet. You might want to use a lightproof window shade or heavy drapes. If other family members are on different schedules or your neighborhood is noisy, consider using a fan to cover or mask noises. Thick carpets will help, too. You can also use earplugs.

Sleep is part of your overall health and fitness, and other contributors to health can also contribute to good sleep:

- * Regular exercise helps you sleep, especially if done on a regular schedule in the afternoon or early evening. Exercising right before you go to bed, however, will probably wake you up.
- * Eat three balanced meals each day and try to avoid rich, spicy food before going to bed.
- * A snack before sleep helps some people, but keep it light. Your best bet is probably that old folk remedy: warm milk.

There are also some things to avoid before sleep:

- * Caffeine is a stimulant, so drinking coffee, tea, or soft drinks within four hours of bedtime can leave you tossing and turning.
- * Nicotine is a stimulant, too, and can help keep you awake.

- * Alcohol may help you go to sleep, but it will also keep you from sleeping soundly. When the alcohol's effects wear off you may well find yourself wide awake.
- * Sleeping pills should be used only with great caution and when prescribed by a doctor for a short-term problem. Long-term use or abuse can create more problems than it solves.

Safety Procedures

Sometimes, despite your best efforts to get a good night's sleep, you'll feel tired during the day. Often you can revive yourself fairly easily. Take breaks during your work time. Get up, walk around, and do a few stretches. Have a refreshing soft drink or a cup of coffee or tea-but don't overdo the caffeine.

A lot of people feel tired in the afternoon, after lunch. That probably has less to do with what you ate than with your body rhythm slowing down. One way to deal with that-and improve your overall fitness-is to incorporate some exercise into your lunch hour. A brisk walk, even around the plant or parking lot, can help work off a few lunchtime calories and make you more alert for the next part of the day.

Sometimes, however, that's not enough. Remember that fatigue can cause mistakes and accidents. If you really believe that you might be a hazard, take some kind of action. You might be able to switch to a task that doesn't require as much alertness and attention or involve safety risks. Or you might ask someone else to back you up on the job. Or let me know that you're exceptionally tired and afraid of making a dangerous mistake and we'll work out a way to handle the situation.

Suppose you do all you can to get on a regular schedule of sound sleep and you're still tossing and turning and feeling dangerously tired on the job. Then you probably have to look closer for a physical or emotional problem. You probably know if you are worried about personal problems or are feeling depressed. If this goes on for an extended period, consider talking with a professional counselor. Regular worry, anxiety, tension, and depression can ruin your health and make your waking hours pretty miserable, too. You owe it to yourself to do something about it. Sleep problems can also have a physical basis. If you don't know why you wake up tired, it may be because you snore. Some snoring is what is called sleep apnea, a breathing blockage that causes a regular cycle of waking, snorting and gasping for air, and falling back to sleep. Some people even stop breathing briefly and repeatedly during the night. There are several forms of sleep apnea, and if you might have this or some other physical sleep disorder, see a doctor.

Summery

Sleep is one of life's essentials; our bodies and our minds really can't do without it. As we've learned, proper sleep is a matter of how long you sleep and how well you sleep. And not enough sleep can create a hazard on the job. Like most things in life, your quality of sleep can be improved. If you are not one of those fortunate enough to always

"sleep like a baby," try some of the techniques we've learned today to sleep better-and work more safely.

Techniques for Restful Sleep Checklist

Create conditions for a good night's sleep:

- * Go to sleep when you're tired.
- * Go to bed at the same time every night, including weekends.
- * Get up at the same time every morning, including weekends.
- * Eliminate distractions.
- * Use a lightproof window shade.
- * Use a fan to mask noise.
- * Exercise regularly, preferably in afternoon or early evening, but not right before going to bed.
- * Keep before-bed snacks light. Drink warm milk.
- * Avoid coffee, tea, soft drinks with caffeine, smoking, or alcohol before going to bed.
- * Use sleeping pills only under medical supervision and for short-term reasons.

When sleep problems persist:

- * Talk with a professional counselor about ongoing stress or worry.
- * See a physician if your snoring habits indicate sleep apnea.

To combat midday tiredness:

- * Get up and walk around.
- * Do stretches.
- * Have a soft drink or coffee in moderation.
- * Take a brisk walk after lunch.

If you're tired enough to be a hazard:

- * Do a task that requires minimal alertness/attention and doesn't pose a safety risk.
- * Have someone nearby back you up.
- * Inform supervisor so that you can prevent a hazardous situation.